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Guilty Upon Preponderance of the Evidence: The American Association for Adult Education and Jim Crow

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Abstract: *The American Association for Adult Education during the mid-twentieth century failed to proactively combat racial discrimination and prejudice which ultimately resulted in discriminatory practices within adult education. This article explicates the relationship between “benign” policies and discriminatory practices through historical research.*

Introduction

Few would be surprised to hear that discrimination existed in education during the mid-twentieth century. Many would cite the overt cases of discrimination in K-12 and higher education championed by the NAACP and other civil rights advocates as prime examples that discrimination was not a stranger to education. For instance, the seminal decision in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* in 1954 had been heralded as the proverbial “nail in the coffin” for segregated education. The impact of this decision reverberated not only throughout K-12 education but also through higher education. Harvey, Harvey, and King (2004) wrote, “While the text of the *Brown* decision was about segregation at the elementary and secondary school level, the subtext was about justice and equality throughout the educational arena and the entire social system” (p. 328). As a result of litigation, the sins of the K-12 and higher education systems with regard to Jim Crow discrimination gained national exposure.

Brown (2004) made an impassioned plea to remember “the unsung cases of the quest for collective desegregation—elementary, secondary, and higher education...” (p. 347). But adult education somehow did not make the roll call. Somehow the subtext of justice and equality that the aforementioned authors spoke of by-passed the adult education educational arena. Somehow adult education escaped scathing national indictments for its promotion of Jim Crow segregation. Perhaps it was able to do so because it lacked central structures like an easily identifiable board of education, or process mechanisms, such as a readily available admission’s policy that could be targeted by civil rights legal warriors. This lack of legal wrangling and famous cases in adult education might lead some to believe that the problem of separate and unequal was nonexistent in adult education. Even though adult education did not receive national attention for such practices, a preponderance of the evidence drawn from a historical study of African American adult education during the 1930s and 1940s suggests otherwise. Adult education was found to be just as guilty as K-12 and higher education of perpetuating Jim Crow racism.

Jim Crow, Cincinnati, American Association for Adult Education

To properly understand the intersection of Jim Crow with adult education, the socio-historical context of the 1930s and 1940s must be illuminated. As was noted by Podeschi (2000), there was a “continuous influence of core U.S. mainstream values (for example, individualism and efficiency) on adult education philosophies throughout the twentieth century” (p. 614). Prejudice was also among those core values and attitudes. Berry (1994) commented that, “Law and the Constitution in the United States have been a reflection of the will of the white majority that white people have, and shall keep, superior economic, political, social, and military power

while black people shall be the permanent mudsills of American society” (p. 204). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, this type of discrimination, prejudice, and violence against African Americans has come to be known as Jim Crow. Jim Crow segregation is most often associated with the South but it existed all over the United States.

Cincinnati, perhaps because of its geographic location as a border city, just across the river from the South, had a proclivity toward Jim Crow racism. Merriweather Hunn (submitted for publication) wrote, “Cincinnati is a city that possessed northern sensibilities that extolled parity and social justice while holding southern inclinations toward Jim Crow prejudice and racism.” Segregation was the norm in housing and social venues, as were inferior conditions in housing and occupation prospects. The West End was home to the city’s largest numbers of African Americans and was characterized by overcrowding, crime, and poor health. Entertainment places, like the Coney Island amusement park, only opened admission to African Americans one day a year. Furthermore, the vast majority of all African Americans were employed in low status, low earning positions even if they possessed credentials, like college degrees. Cincinnati was not as different from the South as one might have thought.

Adult education, as an organized professional field, was still in its infancy during the mid-twentieth century. Prior to 1926, it lacked a centralized organization. With funding and support from the Carnegie Corporation, adult education was inadvertently provided with such an organization – the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE). The AAAE acted as a clearinghouse for adult education agencies and information. It organized and disseminated knowledge. By virtue of its status as the national organization, AAAE provided guidance for the field of adult education. AAAE’s education philosophy of liberal education reflected the vision of the Corporation. The liberal education ideal developed out of and was embedded in the vision of the Corporation which was “that access to knowledge ...positively related to the awakening of individual ‘genius’” (Lageman, 1987, p. 211).

A historian named James Harvey Robinson influenced the Corporation’s vision with his call for “the humanizing of knowledge” for the purpose of “overcoming the cultural divide” because “matters pertaining to the dissemination of knowledge had to do with enfranchisement...” (Lageman, 1987, pp. 207-208). In the Corporation’s mind, liberal education would lead to collective citizenship genius, which would be beneficial to the country at large. Frederick Keppel, the president of the Carnegie Corporation commissioned studies in adult education to determine the best methods of education. Rose (1989) indicated that “the AAAE was to serve as a consulting body which would aid in the identification and dissemination of techniques so that a novel approach to learning could be developed” (p. 149”). During this process of experimentation, there was a concerted effort by AAAE to be apolitical. According to Griffith (1989), “The AAAE emphasized the theory, philosophy and national prestige of the adult education movement” (p. 9). Though AAAE was not designed for the direct benefit of the learners, it, through its promotion of liberal education, had an indelible impact on the education of everyday adult learners, especially African American learners.

AAAE’s Experiments in African American Adult Education

It is not surprising given the focus on liberal education that issues related to African American adult education were seen as temporary projects, not as an integral parts of the broader

adult education program. It was just an experiment in education. AAAE provided support for what were called the Harlem and Atlanta experiments, *Bronze Booklets* which were publications based on African American life, and a series of conferences on African American adult education. (Franklin, 1990; Guy, 1996). The Harlem and Atlanta experiments started in 1932 and 1931 respectively. The experiments offered a variety of educational opportunities dealing with both vocational and cultural issues. "In both centers emphasis has been placed on cultural history and economic status of the race....Offerings of this nature have met with sustained response and have been found the most effective motivation for the program as a whole" (*Journal of Adult Education*, p. 360). The experiments were prototypes of the cultural pluralist education program supported by Alaine Locke. They were deemed to be extremely successful and were favorably received in those two cities. In spite of this, the experiments were terminated in 1934.

AAAE, through Carnegie, also provided short-term support for the publication of materials by the Associates in Negro Folk Education. This organization was charged with the task of developing educational materials for the African American adult (Guy, 1996). Its efforts resulted in a series of eight books called the *Bronze Booklets*, which were written to highlight various aspects of African American life and were published between 1936 and 1938. According to the *Journal of Adult Education*, "these booklets or syllabi have been written by Negroes for Negroes....The booklets have received an immediate response from the Negro audience and are being distributed through Negro institutions, extension agencies, etc" (*Journal of Adult Education*, p. 367). In spite of this, the AAAE and Carnegie were not willing to provide the long-term support that was needed to sustain the project.

Furthermore issues of African American adult education were apparently not important enough to warrant inclusion in the main national conferences sponsored by AAAE so separate conferences on African American education were held on African American college campuses (Franklin, p.127-129). African American adult educators developed their own conferences to discuss issues of importance to the African American community. There were eight conferences on adult education for African Americans between 1938 and 1949. The White adult educators who attended the conferences "never quite identified themselves with their fellow conferees" (Reddick, p. 488). This was symptomatic of the problem between African American adult education and the AAAE. AAAE never quite identified with African American adult education in the same way most European Americans never quite identified with African Americans. Jim Crow segregation dictated how African Americans and European Americans interacted with each other. Realizing that their reluctant partners controlled the dance cards, African Americans daily danced an intricate Jim Crow waltz with European Americans being careful not to step on toes or move too fast.

The experiments, the *Bronze Booklets*, and the African American conferences were indicators of AAAE's commitment to African American adult education. Hans Kohn (1939) wrote, "Adult education is one of our most potent means for transforming democratic ideals into actualities. In seeking to extend and improve adult education, we can not afford to overlook the Negro problem or continue to relegate it to the very minor place that, until now, it has occupied in our programs" (p. 80). AAAE's goal was never to provide long-term adult education to African Americans but rather to determine by experimentation what type of learning activities worked best in African American communities. This experimentation represented the notion of

acquiring knowledge for knowledge's sake and was consistent with liberal education's focus of diffusion not application of knowledge.

Liberal Education's Trickle Down Effect

This idea of liberal education is critical to developing a conceptual basis for understanding the relationship between Jim Crow and the AAAE. Liberal education was abstract and based on the concepts of a "free market" and the "melting pot" in which every race and culture presumably were afforded the same opportunity to take advantage of its offerings. However, as evidence from a study on African American adult education in Cincinnati suggested, liberal education programs cannot be equitable in a society where certain classes of people are physically and socially restricted from the market of opportunities. By not labeling the opportunities "For Whites Only," AAAE through liberal education attempted to side step the question of racial inequality in the United States. But by not acknowledging the racial inequality and discrimination and by not actively developing programs to circumvent the racial status quo of the day, AAAE played a role in promoting it. That prevailing attitude of uncontested fairness through liberal education trickled down through the various levels of adult education. It manifested itself at the national level through AAAE, at the state and local levels through various councils, and at the community level through the organizations that administered programs. Against this backdrop, a discussion can emerge around the idea of how seemingly benign policies promoted discrimination in education.

Many of the organizations involved in adult education in Cincinnati depended on information from the AAAE to help inform their policies. The liberal education ideology, coupled with Cincinnati's system of Jim Crow resulted in segregated and inferior opportunities for African American adult learners. The YMCA, YWCA, and the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) provide examples of the interaction between Jim Crow and adult education in Cincinnati. Each of these organizations operated separate programs for African Americans and European Americans. While it is true that Cincinnati during the 1930s and 1940s was not ruled by a *de jure* system of segregation, *de facto* segregation was prevalent and adhered to in most instances. Because of the residential housing patterns, African Americans lived clustered together within larger neighborhoods where European Americans also resided such that clear color lines demarcated the boundaries between the European American and African American sections of the various neighborhoods.

Consistent with the liberal education ideal of making knowledge accessible to all, the aforementioned organizations offered programs for both African Americans and European Americans. In concordance with Jim Crow, those organizations offered separate programs for each race. The YWCA and YMCA facilities designated for African Americans were smaller and located within the African American section of the neighborhood. The ones for European Americans were walking distances away and were larger and better equipped. This deliberate segregation was also seen in the CMHA. It managed Cincinnati's first housing project, the Laurel Homes, in the West End. Both African Americans and European Americans resided in the housing project. Because of Jim Crow, an African American administrator was hired to direct the activities of the African American residents and a European American administrator was hired to direct the activities for European American residents. Three more housing projects were developed. Two were for European Americans and one for African Americans and the Laurel

Homes eventually was inhabited primarily by African Americans. Since the housing projects maintained their own educational programs, they became another outlet for segregated adult learning opportunities in Cincinnati.

In addition to the problems of separate and inferior, liberal education ideology resulted in disempowerment for African Americans. Liberal education bred conformity to Eurocentric-based ideas because it did not attend to the unique characteristics and situations that affected the material reality of people who were oppressed. It promoted a worldview and lifestyle consistent with the Eurocentric knowledge base. Organizations were paternalistic because the learning opportunities provided were designed to meet the needs of the African American community as conceptualized by Eurocentric values and attitudes. For instance, the YWCA offered classes in cleaning and home decorating because as the West End YWCA 1935 report stated, the West End was “surrounded by drabness and poverty, we have set up a goal for achievement of cleanliness.” Later in that same report, it made reference to how challenging it was to “build character” among the African American women and girls so educational programming was designed to build character among the ladies. Being devoid of input from the learners and lacking attentiveness to the African American learners’ culture, this dimension of liberal education inevitably led to social control, value-laden charges of rightness, and reproduction of the status quo.

Benign Policies, Bad Practices

Discrimination abounded in Cincinnati and filtered into the opportunities for adult learning for African Americans. Adult education was supposed to improve society but through liberal education it worked to perpetuate the status quo and reinforce the inequities that existed in society. AAEE’s version of adult education was supposed to “result in social stability,” and “restore to individuals the power to make decisions about their lives” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 192-193). However social stability for African Americans turned out to be a euphemism for the racial status quo and further consignment to a place of inferiority in American society. Through an over reliance on liberal education without cultural specificity and without acknowledgement of the racially based injustices in society, adult education under the auspices of AAEE was just another institution in America in the 1930s and 1940s that practiced Jim Crow discrimination. Though its official policy did not overtly promote discrimination, the subsequent manifestations of the programming guided by it did. AAEE opted to hide behind the facade of equality created by its liberal education guiding principle.

Huey Long (1989) wrote, “In its original use, liberal meant “belonging to a free man.” In a society where people were either free or slaves, the idea was more powerful than it is today” (p. 3). I submit that in the 1930s and 1940s (and perhaps even in our contemporary times) that the idea of liberal education was still a powerful idea. Learning still equated to freedom for many African Americans – freedom from segregated and inferior conditions, freedom from injustice and poverty, freedom from second-class citizenship. But liberal education turned a blind eye to the social conditions and in doing so reinforced Jim Crow racism and its attendant social problems. Liberal education, as promoted by the AAEE, best supported those who lived in freedom. The unfree remained shackled.

The lesson for contemporary educators is that seemingly innocuous policies have a profound influence on the learning experiences of adults. Adult educators must be cognizant of

the philosophies that they hold and the policies endorsed by guiding organizations and must carefully evaluate those philosophies and policies to determine the extent to which they inhibit program participation by non-dominant culture members and lead to inferior education for these groups. Our history should teach us to be ever vigilant.

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